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ABSTRACT

Evaluation activities should always be considered in terms of the effect that they have on the persons or programs being evaluated. This is a particularly critical concept when young children are being evaluated. Evaluation should be of some value to the persons or programs being evaluated. For example, when a Follow Through program is being evaluated, persons in the community should be assisted in developing the skills they need to conduct evaluative activities valuable to them. In other words, every evaluation should be considered in terms of its effects on the individuals or programs being evaluated. Procedures commonly used to measure outcomes in early childhood programs are conceived too narrowly and place artificial constraints on naturalness and spontaneity. (Author/KM)

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RESPONSIVE EVALUATION

by Meg Barden

February 1973

When evaluation time comes to a federally funded early childhood program, everyone in the school knows it. Persons involved are either required to change their roles or do so inadvertantly because of the situation. The project director becomes a coordinator of testers, observers, tests and testing places. The social worker becomes a scheduler of parents' time, a transportation expert, and maybe even a taxi driver. Teachers are transformed into authoritarian test givers or the self-conscious subject of a strange observer. Pupils may also be watched by a note taking stranger, or required to sit still and check a correct answer on a certain page in a certain amount of time.

Rooms in the school change their functions. An advisor in one of our larger programs reported that use of the library was denied to the entire school for almost two months while the testing was in process. Books are not the only thing denied children in deference to evaluator's schedules. Field trips, often a culminating feature of the school year, must often be curtailed or eliminated due to the evaluation data being collected at that time.

Since Follow Through is a research and demonstration program, such changes in roles and schedules, if they do not produce spurious data to observer or test giver, can be seen as essential interruptions.

The objection here is not the interruption per se, but who will benefit from it. This will be dealt with later in detail.

There are other familiar objections to evaluation. Proponents of open education object to current evaluation techniques on several grounds.

Roland Barth suggests:

> The preferred source of verification for a child's solution to a problem comes through the materials he is working with, rather than through standardized tests.

Perhaps the most frequent objection of all, is to these "objective tests," which are seen as being at such great variance with open education that they should not be used as measuring instruments.

It appears obvious that when limited measuring instruments are applied to programs with broad and flexible goals the measurements provide only limited information about that educational model. Standard achievement tests, or even observational schedules which look only at a child's achievement in academic subjects won't tell anyone the real capacity the child may have for growing, thinking and behaving.

In evaluating the national evaluation of Follow Through, other limitations rarely considered are even more important:

Who evaluates?

To whom is the evaluation addressed?

What is the basis for the timing of the evaluation?

What is the distance in thought, in status and in economic rewards between the evaluator and the evaluatee?

In order to understand the effect these limitations have on any evaluation of the program, the characteristics of open education need defining. Barth and Rathbone find "openness" in all aspects of the model:

> Not only are classroom doors ajar and children moving about, but time is open and so is curriculum. Most fundamental, however, is an "openness of self." Persons are openly sensitive to and supportive of other persons, not closed off by anxiety, threat, custom and role. Feelings are exposed, acknowledged and respected, not withheld in fear and defensiveness. Administrators are open to initiatives on the part of teachers; teachers are open to the possibilities inherent in children; children are open to the possibilities in other children, in materials, in themselves.

Two groups of persons Barth and Rathbone did not include are parents and professional evaluators.

In many evaluations of educational programs, whatever the model, the interests of parents are ignored. Except for a few programs which include them deliberately as crucial persons in influencing a child's cognitive development, parents are rarely consulted by teachers, school administrators or evaluators about what they think ought to be in an educational program for their children. Seldom do they have input into when, why or how such a program might be evaluated, albeit they usually know their children better than anyone.

Clearly, openness in the classroom and school cannot be maximally effective for children if there is not also openness between home and school. Because parents, school personnel and community leaders are often not given an opportunity to propose, let alone respond, to either the purposes or the findings of national evaluators, such evaluations tend to reinforce suspicion and antagonism between the very groups--parents and teachers--who need to cooperate with one another for better education.

Consider who usually requests a program evaluation in this country. In federally funded programs the request for an evaluation is instituted by Congress or a Government Department or Bureau, who are properly concerned that the tax dollars given to specific programs are will spent. Tax paying parents would, no doubt, support this purpose. However, national programs, such as Follow Through are now so geographically and educationally complex that only large, wealthy research and development firms are able to bid for the opportunity to evaluate them. Only such firms can afford the professional expertise, the computer time, and the travel money to provide a sophisticated research design which will produce a valid evaluation. Unfortunately, it is a long way from

an Appalachian cabin or a city slum tenement to the plush offices of a research institute. Consider how such firms operate: In order to meet federal rules and deadlines they hire three shifts of secretaries and pay professionals thousands of dollars for their grantsmenship. One firm has an interesting innovation--namely a telephone in every toilet cubicle so no important communication will be missed at any time. This firm has often had government contracts to evaluate programs serving families who had neither telephone nor indoor toilet.

Some distance between evaluators and school children might result in objective reports--but where the gap has reached such great proportions it is probable they cannot understand each other. Let me cite some examples:

One of our Follow Through programs is in a tobacco growing country. Testers were sent in to interview or test parents in the fall and in the spring. A disappointed community member who cared a lot about the success of the Follow Through program commented:

> We didn't have a very good showing of parents. When the evaluation team came in the fall, most parents were harvesting tobacco, when they returned in the spring, most parents were planting tobacco. It was reported we had poor parent involvement.

Another time a team of experts came to evaluate a program in a racially mixed community. One of the experts reported poor relationships between whites and blacks because the white social worker did not go to the door of the black parent when picking her up for a meeting, but sat in the car and honked her horn. Had the "expert" openly confronted either party (instead of sending off a written evaluation to the government funding agency) she would have discovered both social worker and parent both felt so sure of their good relationship they did not stand on ceremony with one another.

In another Follow Through program parents refused to cooperate with the evaluation team--not because it was made up of distant experts, but <u>because</u> the

distant experts had made the faux pas of hiring parents from a rival program. The Follow Through parents were convinced these parent testers had a vested interest in seeing that the Follow Through children did poorly on the tests and could manipulate the results. They reported this in confidence to an advisor feeling they had no way to communicate with the distant evaluators except through the distrusted testers.

Perhaps for innovative, complex educational programs it is the timing of program implementation and evaluation which is most unrealistic in terms of an Open Education model. Congress and most school systems are impossibly impatient. They demand to know at least each year, and in innumerable mid year reports what outcomes they are getting for money spent. This might be realistic if they were funding a circus. For example: In a few month's time it would be easy to list cost of training for two trapeze artists and three stunt dogs and describe exactly which tricks they had learned to perform. It would even be possible where you were dealing with school children if the concern was only with reading skills and computing ability. For example, 30 children had this kind of reading and arithmetic training and now they can read so many words per minute and multiply by three numbers.

However, if you consider education as something beyond a few skills, and children as complex, lively human beings who need and want to know much more than how to read fast and compute accurately, then the problem of who should be evaluated and at what time, is important.

In Great Britain one is told that it takes five years after college for a teacher to become a good implementer of open education. Now even if we do things faster in the U.S.A., it is still unlikely that in one year's time we will be able to train a traditional teacher to become an open education teacher. If she can't learn to teach the model in a year, why are we measuring outcomes before there is a meaningful input?

The notion of yearly evaluations of pupil outcomes creates unnecessary tension and nuisance. Most teachers are aware when evaluations can give them valuable feedback. They also know this may vary i. terms of their own skills, the program they are attempting to implement and the background of the children involved. Too often in open education programs the standard achievement test, demanded at a certain time, guarantees feelings of frustration or failure for children who most need to experience success. A good teacher wants feedback in the form of test scores or observational data. Such a teacher is eager to know how well she and her pupils are doing. However, that teacher needs the option of choosing when, and how to get this information. Her needs are rarely considered by a federal funding system which dictates requests for evaluation designs in ridiculously limited periods leaving no time for evaluator or evaluated to communicate, reflect and respond in a reasonable way.

To summarize the limitations:

Who evaluates? Highly paid professionals in a limited number of Research and Development firms.

To whom is the evaluation addressed? To Government agencies and in turn to Congress.

What is the basis for the timing of the evaluation? Congressional funding habits.

What is the distance in thought, in status and in economic rewards between the evaluated and the evaluatee? Immense.

Is there a way to use federal funds to help rather than hinder evaluation? Yes.

Let's envision a different evaluation procedure using the Open Education Advisory model. It might also require federal funds, but requests for their use would come from the tax payers who provided the funds in the first place. This model offers support and advice to people at their request and timed according to the needs of the program.

Supposing the evaluation was initiated not by Congress, but by the teacher, herself, who wanted to know what a child, or a class, knew in certain areas at

certain times. Further suppose she could request an evaluation specialist (funded by the government) to help her do this?

Supposing parents, who were concerned that their children needed to learn faster or better, wanted to diagnose the problems their children had in learning, or to discover appropriate techniques for alleviating these problems. Could our taxes go toward sending them a team of experts in diagnosing learning problems?

Supposing a school administrator wanted to look at different teaching styles and practices in his school system to determine which seemed to be the most effective for his school population. What about an expert evaluator to help him do this?--someone who understands school administration and has ability to cooperate with teachers.

Supposing a child wants to know something, e.g., how to measure the weight of an object using a scale, but has not yet had the opportunity and guidance to find the solution. If given a chance and some help, he will, no doubt, discover the solution. No need here for a national testing program to evaluate the child's failure or success.

At this time in America such simple use of expert help for school personnel is rare. Time, space and guidance for the child who wants to look for solutions to problems is often lacking.

This paper poses the problem: Can the federally funded $20,000 evaluator from the big city on the east or west coast ever come to know, understand, explain, communicate, and help the $3,000 family in the hills, or the $8,000 teacher in the inner city?

Unless sophisticated evaluators protest the harmful constraints concerning the timing and procedure of their evaluations; unless they learn to listen to and address the persons they are evaluating, funds for national evaluations of federal programs must be viewed as still another chance for the rich to get richer and the poor to feel more defeated.